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SUBJECT: DARFUR UPDATE: UNAMID FEARS ATTACKS COMING IN JEBEL MARRA

REF: A) KHARTOUM 1095

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) officials are deeply concerned that the Government of Sudan (GOS) plans to fortify recent gains against Sudanese Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid (SLA/AW) forces by attacking the rebel stronghold of West Jebel Marra in the coming weeks. These officials cited as evidence the resupply of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) base in Kabkabiya, the mobilization of Arab militia in the area, and the digging of trenches along the road leading to Jebel Marra. In North Darfur, UNAMID confirmed the continued presence of Chadian armed opposition groups, noting that 400 well-armed Chadian rebels in 100 vehicles are active west of El Fasher. Near Shangil Tobaya, clashes, which injured seven, broke out between Zaghawa and Birgit tribesmen on October 20 over access to water. A UNAMID peacekeeping force intervened to stop the fighting, and has pledged to supply water to the two communities while reconciliation efforts continue. In El Fasher, former rebel leader Minni Minnawi hosted the third "Liberation Council" of his Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM/MM) on October 20, bemoaning lack of support for the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) and criticizing the international community for "running after the mirage of the non-signatories." Minnawi further urged that his party be viewed as the inclusive party for all Darfuris. END SUMMARY.

IS THE GOS PREPARING TO ATTACK JEBEL MARRA?

12. (SBU) UNAMID expressed strong concern on October 21 that the GOS plans to consolidate recent gains against SLA/AW forces by advancing from Kebkabiya into West Jebel Marra. Those stationed at UN teamsites in Kebkabiya and Sartony indicate the SAF has resupplied its base in Kebkabiya; activated local janjaweed in preparation for a ground assault; and dug trenches on the road that leads to Jebel Marra. Attacks in Korma and Tawila earlier this month (reftel) pushed SLA/AW from their lowland bases and separated SLA Northern Command from its main commander. Well-informed UN officials in El Fasher suspect that an empowered SAF, aided by Arab militia based near Kebkabiya, could attempt to carry out the first advance of its long-rumored "five-point" plan for taking Jebel Marra. Such an advance could come as soon as the coming week. The UN will attempt to conduct an assessment on October 25 (septel).

13. (SBU) Although Jebel Marra comprises the forbidding terrain from which SLA launched its 2003 attacks on the SAF, various unpaved roads do afford access in and out of the region. UN authorities see one particular single-lane unpaved "goat path" near Kebkabiya as susceptible to SAF use for a strike into SLA/AW-held West Jebel Marra. The SAF only secured the El Fasher-Kebkabiya road this year, and observers believe that it is making preparations within the next 7-10 days to commence a coordinated air-ground attack on the road leading south from Ed al Nagib, located 25 km east of Kebkabiya, to Sartony. (Note: The village of Sartony is an SLA/AW-held town

located at the approximate coordinates of 240 15' 00" N and 130 30' 00" E, 25 km south of Nagib. End note.)

14. (SBU) Experienced observers in El Fasher speculate that any attack on Jebel Marra positions would follow the classic GOS strategy of aerial bombardment followed by a ground attack. Unlike Khalil Ibrahim's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), SLA/AW commanders rarely conduct attacks and remain vulnerable to a SAF siege, as evidenced by their immediate withdrawal from Tawila in the wake of the SAF advance of October 2. However, the uneven terrain that SLA/AW has occupied since its inception may provide it with a natural advantage to avoid SAF bombardment and push back a janjaweed ground assault. Additionally, SLA/AW commanders have reported that fighters managed to capture two SAF trucks carrying ammunition in August. Despite this, UN observers warn that a high-level of civilian casualties is possible. They point out that the SAF and janjaweed have targeted civilians in the past when finding rebels has proven difficult.

CHADIAN REBELS IN NORTH DARFUR

15. (SBU) The GOS has managed to hold its recent advances in North Darfur, and appears to be successfully balancing the various forces under its control to stymie JEM aspirations there. Chadian armed opposition groups (CAOGs) remain active in North Darfur, and UN observers believe they comprise part of the GOS's strategy to block the transit routes used by Darfuri rebels to launch attacks and connect their separate commands. Accurate UN estimates gleaned from regular observations of convoys indicate that up to 400 well-armed Chadian rebels in 100 vehicles are active in North Darfur, west of

KHARTOUM 00001199 002 OF 002

El Fasher. UN field reports have noted that Chadian rebels have looted markets and houses for food and clothing following advances in recent months in Darfur. In addition to relying on janjaweed militias, which were used in attacks in Mau and Tawila earlier this month, the SAF currently has two Hind "Ababeel" helicopters stationed at Kutum. Observers have noted that the SAF now conducts regular patrols in the areas between El Fasher and Kutum, most likely as a way to announce their presence and discourage rebel advances.

TRIBAL CLASHES NEAR SHANGIL TOBAYA

16. (SBU) UNAMID sources also reported that on October 20, clashes occurred between Zaghawa and Birgit tribesmen between Jabel Moskul and Jabelti (about 20 km SE of Shangil Tobaya). A UNAMID peacekeeping force in Shangil Tobaya intervened by interposing their Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) between the two groups to stop the fighting. Both tribes, however, suffered casualties, and seven tribesmen were taken for treatment to the UN level 1 Hospital in Shangil Tobaya. The cause of the clash was attributed to the struggle over access to limited water sources. As a temporary solution, the UNAMID peacekeeping force in Shangil Tobaya has pledged to supply water to the communities while reconciliation efforts continue.

MINNAWI HOSTS "LIBERATION COUNCIL"

17. (SBU) Minni Minnawi hosted the third "Liberation Council" of his party (SLM/MM) in El Fasher on October 20, hosting local politicians and members of his Zaghawa-based coalition from across Darfur in a show of political strength. Complaining that the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) had not provided funding to the DPA, Minnawi also criticized the international community for not fully funding UNAMID, and "running after the mirage of the non-signatories." Joined by several Darfuri allies praising SLM/MM's activities in uniting Darfur, Minnawi pushed for his party to be seen as the "inclusive and complete" political movement for Darfuris. Speaking with poise following the speech, several SLM/MM confidantes

admitted that their party has yet to enunciate a strategy for next year's elections, adding that it was "too soon" for SLM/MM to commit to any option.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The potential for the GOS to initiate further attacks on SLA/AW in North Darfur is of concern. With the rebel movements weak and scattered, such an offensive could derail the fragile efforts at rebel unification necessary for the commencement of peace talks. Meanwhile, UNAMID's successful intervention to halt tribal clashes near Shangil Tobaya is a promising sign, offering hope that UNAMID's new military leadership may result in more active implementation of its peacekeeping mandate.

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